Householding and Land Ownership: Constructing a Typology of Circular Migration of Cambodian Migrant Workers in Thailand

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Abstract

Labor migration is no longer a linear movement or even a one-way and one-directional flow of labor. The advancements in transportation and communication technologies have changed trans-border mobility from permanent to a large extent, circular. Interestingly, the wage gap between labor-sending and labor-receiving countries is not the only reason triggering the move. Working abroad has become a decision made by Cambodian households, resulting in about one million Cambodian migrant workers in Thailand. Migrant workers, especially undocumented laborers, are more vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, and trafficking. In response, this irregularity facilitates the circularity of these migrant workers. To explore this phenomenon, this paper attempts to construct the typology of circular migration, namely quasi-permanent migration, sojourning, and return. Qualitative methods consisting of group and individual interviews were employed in interviewing Cambodian workers in Rayong, Thailand, and returnees in Kampong Cham, Cambodia. The findings suggest that land-owning Cambodian households adopt a householding strategy, work in Thailand, and migrate circularly back home periodically.

Keywords

Cambodia; circular migration; householding; returnee; Thailand

Introduction

People travel across country borders blurring the political and economic boundaries demarcating nation-states. As such, classical migration studies are more concerned about the cause, direction (Leal & Harder, 2021), and pattern of people's mobility (Athukorala, 2006). The push-and-pull (Lee, 1966) or new economic factors, such as a surplus of labor supply (Bhatia, 1979), wage disparity (Todaro, 1969), and the like, are no longer adequate to explain the flow of migrants. However, the migration system has become more complex in the globalization era. The patterns are less adhesive to the rural-urban and north-south models. As a result, circular types of migration (Massey et al., 2005; Wickramasekara, 2011) have become common, especially for labor migration, yet the cycles, periods, and duration of stay vary.

The sudden expulsion of Cambodian workers in Thailand in the middle of 2014 and 2017 might have been politically motivated, but the exoduses were, in fact, not only one-way repatriations. Cambodian labor NGO leaders confirmed that many Cambodian returnees went to Thailand in the same year, and more were drawn in the following years. Although the exoduses were eye-catching, normal types of circular migration continue between Cambodian and Thai borders. Among these migrants, depending on how "documented" is defined, are largely undocumented.

To explore the above phenomenon, this paper examines the circular migration of Cambodians into Thailand. Although both countries are labor-sending, Thailand tends to be a popular destination for laborers from three adjacent countries: Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos. This analysis also attempts to distinguish between three types of Cambodian migrant workers in Thailand by their mode of circular migration: regular sojourners, long-term and quasi-permanent labor migrants, and non-migrants and local laborers. The labor migration pattern, social networks, and transnational socioeconomic activities of the migrants are likewise examined. The findings may contribute to the knowledge gap of householding and circular migration between land-owning and landless rural households.

To better comprehend the above venture, this paper investigates the back-and-forth movements, patterns, and factors contributing to the circular migration of Cambodian workers to and from Thailand by answering the following broad research questions:

1) What causes circular migration of migrant workers, especially contributing to their back-and-forth movements over time?
2) Does farmland ownership help explain the pattern of circular migration?
3) What is the differential pattern of circular migration of migrant workers in terms of duration of stay and frequency of return?

Consequently, this study attempts to construct a typology of circular migration, namely quasi-permanent migration, sojourning, and return with the connection of land ownership at home.

Conceptualizing permanent to circular migration

Types of migration

Over the past few decades, there has been a mobility turn in the migration trend (Sheller & Urry, 2006). Migration is no longer a linear process or a one-way, one-directional movement from sending to receiving states. Diaspora and permanent migration have become less relevant in the globalization era, especially related to working abroad. As a result, more temporary or transient migrations than permanent types are happening across borders. In an early attempt to identify more complex migration patterns in the post-World War II period, De Gonzalez (1961) identified five types of labor migration: seasonal, temporary non-seasonal, recurrent, continuous, and permanent. For labor migration, the common pattern is a quasi-permanent mode, as many foreign workers spend over half of their working age in receiving countries. Afterward, the foreign workers permanently return home to start their micro-businesses or simply retire.

Non-permanent forms of migration, like temporary, circular, seasonal, and the like, are in mixed usage. The temporary and circular forms of migration sometimes may be overlooked as they can be a transition to permanent migration over time. Skeldon (2012) distinguished circular migration from immigration to explore these terms and clarify their definitions. They discovered that in the post-World War II period, developed countries imported laborers from developing countries. Skeldon further found that these wealthy states only wanted to utilize the imported labor force to curb the country's labor shortage, thus prohibiting migrant workers from becoming permanent residents. As a result, these laborers were required to circulate back to their home countries.

The idea of circular migration stems from the literature on internal migration. These rural to urban migrants do not necessarily relocate permanently to cities but, in many cases, frequently sojourn seasonally, often over several years (Hugo, 1982). These short-term movements and returns far exceed the number of permanent rural to urban migrations within a country's border (Skeldon, 2012). Similar circularity exists in international labor migration. Many migrants maintain back-and-forth movement between their home and the receiving country. Accordingly, this circular type of migration can be classified as legitimate for migration that occurs at the will of the migrants beyond the government's promotion if facilitated by government policies or as *de facto* circulation (Wickramasekara, 2011).

In exploration, a volume of literature utilizes the term transient workers, which has almost no difference between circular and temporary migration. The narrow sense of transient migrants refers to those moving around transnationally for a significant time. For example, the NGO Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) in Singapore proposes that foreign domestic helpers and guest workers are not a new category of migrant workers (Lyons, 2005), seeing as many of the laborers utilize information and communication technology (ICT) to connect their everyday lives and experiences between home and their destinations (Gomes, 2017). Gomes (2017) referred to Australian and Singaporean transient migrants as 'digital natives' who are young people growing up in multilingual societies and widely use the internet. Therefore, the necessity of these transient migrants to practice physical circulation between the two countries, as suggested by Skeldon (2012), is doubtful.

More foreign labor programs in developed nations define migrant workers in terms of circular workers instead of the former category of temporary workers. This categorization results in

international organizations that have promoted this statutory and operational definition for a triple-win among the migrant workers, the host nations, and the developing countries as sending countries (Wickramasekara, 2011). As a result, more foreign labor importation programs have switched to circular and temporary labor migration (CTLM) instead of its predecessor, temporary labor migration (TLM) (commonly known as guest worker programs), which emerged after the World War II period in developed countries (Zapata-Barrero et al., 2012). As such, TLM emphasizes laborers' temporary status, which means the laborers are barred from naturalizing to full citizenship. Consequently, such a program usually lasts only a few years, and the migrant workers must return to their home country. Returning to work in the host country is expected; however, the duration of stay will be reset to zero. Thus, circular trips are entailed but in a more restricted manner. In contrast, CTLM promotes a new circularity (Newland et al., 2008), emphasizing voluntary and repetitive movements. More flexibility is given to migrant workers to move back and forth between their home and host countries. This repetitive sojourning is based on migrants' needs and will, not restricted by the duration of the labor program. Accordingly, a higher frequency of circulation and irregular sojourn pattern is expected.

The Migration Policy Institute defines circular migration as "a continuing, long-term, and fluid pattern of international mobility of people among countries that occupy what is now increasingly recognized as a single economic space" (Newland et al., 2008, p. 1). Similarly, Fargues (2008) suggested circular labor migration is characterized by its temporary residence, renewable, circularity, the legality of stay, respect of migrants' rights, and most importantly, the move aims at meeting the labor demand in the receiving country. Zapata-Barrero et al. (2012) distinguished the restricted and extended definitions of circular migration. The former definitions represent a duration of stay in the receiving country for less than one year, for example, seasonal and repeated sojourning. At the same time, the latter distinguishes that the return of migrants to the place of origin after a long period abroad is regarded as non-permanent labor migration rather than circular migration. Even though most migration studies accept the extended definition of circularity as circular migration, this dichotomy does not specify the duration of stay. Even those migrant workers who have worked nearly their whole life and returned home for retirement can be regarded as undertaking circular trips (Constant & Zimmermann, 2011). Respectfully, the authors generally agree with Fargues' (2008) definition of circular migration but prefer to include undocumented workers and those who rarely return home or only for retirement instead of categorizing them into a broad sense of circular trips (Constant & Zimmermann, 2011). Therefore, this paper considers such workers as quasi-permanent migrants.

Householding strategy

In recent decades, several studies have raised doubts concerning whether migration is an individual choice, or a collective decision made by the whole family. The monetary gain from migration funds the household in the hometown in the form of remittances. Some family members work abroad while the rest of the family remain in the home village, taking care of the farmlands as a social differentiation of rural households. This arrangement helps to diversify the risk and maximize the resources (Massey et al., 2005). As such, migrant workers sojourn between their hometown and the workplace abroad. Some workers even seasonally return to help the harvest if they are close to home, along with remittances that are expected to be sent back home for the family's financial support. In other words, the idea of householding for rural families is to use the household as a planning unit to utilize their workforce and human resources (Douglas, 2007, 2014).

Permanent migration leads to a split family once one or more members leave to stay in a receiving country. Nonetheless, the householding continues to sustain the family in the sending country, with the family members moving back and forth between two places while maintaining a close connection with their family in the hometown and transferring resources back to their families. The householding process, especially in Southeast Asia, sustains smallholder farming by combining low-return farming activities and non-farming employment in cities (Nurick & Hak, 2019; Rigg et al., 2016). The process further extends across country borders, becoming global householding without fostering permanent migration for many rural families in Asia. This result is due to the foreign worker programs in many Asian countries prohibiting unskilled foreign workers from bringing family members with them and even getting married to residents in the receiving country.

The selective migration policies of these countries forbid undesired workers (usually low-educated, unskilled workers from developing countries) from settling down and becoming permanent residents or citizens. Douglas (2014) stated that "they [undesired workers] are never in line to become resident or citizen, and they are quickly disposable when economies experience crises, as has repeatedly been the case in recent decades. In these senses, the borders can induce global householding, or household-splitting, by prohibiting household members from joining together in the migrant destination country" (p. 315). Consequently, existing studies on migration tend to focus on those who have left and less on the non-migration or staying migrants (Huijsmans, 2014). Householding provides an alternative perspective of migration and staying as a strategic arrangement, as the social differentiation within the household is embedded within the frame of kinship that shapes the power and relationship within the household. Therefore, the arrangement of migration or staying within a household is a negotiation process under the relational structure of dependence, interdependence, and independence and the norms in the community at large (Whitehead et al., 2007).

Previous studies of migrant workers in Thailand

While there is a large volume of research on migrant workers in Thailand, little attention has been paid to the circularity of their movement. For example, transportation between Thailand and Cambodia is quite convenient, especially from the central region of Thailand to the Thailand-Cambodian border. Railway services in Cambodia have resumed, connecting Phnom Penh, Sihanoukville, Battambang, and Thailand via Poipet and Aranyaprathet. Buses and other vehicles run through sustained Thailand and Cambodia land border checkpoints. In addition, many undocumented Cambodians pay agents to smuggle them into Thailand. Therefore, the means for circulation between the two countries is abundant, so the transportation cost is the only consideration, resulting in some migrant workers being continually employed in Thailand for two to three consecutive years without returning home (Sakulsri et al., 2020).

The adaption and cohesion of migrants in the host society leading to a mixing of cultures may be a consideration when deciding whether to return to one's hometown during holidays or a gap between jobs. Acculturation is the process when two cultures interact, which is usually found with migrants from other cultural backgrounds in a host society. Berry (1997) reported that acculturation strategies consist of differentials of cultural adaptation and heritage, otherwise known as AIMS (assimilation, integration, marginalization, and separation). A study by Chaisuparakul (2015) on Cambodian migrants in Bangkok and its vicinity suggested that these migrants are less adapted to Thai society, such as drinking alcohol with their co-

ethnic peers during leisure time or pretending to appreciate the broader host society; on the contrary, they often complain about multicultural status. Consequently, the Cambodian migrants are, as Berry (1997) puts it, separated or segregated from Thai society.

When questioning why some children migrate and others are left behind, Huijsmans (2014) found in their study of Laotian villagers' householding that parents prefer elder daughters to remain to keep the households; however, the outcomes vary. Many sons are sent to work in Thailand, not just for remittances but also to avoid young males becoming idle at home. The arrangement depends on the actual presence of a senior young person in the household. Huijsmans likewise found that once a helper has been provided, the middle daughters are more likely to migrate to work in Thailand than the sons. This gendered division of labor explains Laotian householding. Hak et al. (2011) found that in Laotian households, one or two children in the family typically migrate. Still, this average is slightly higher in Cambodian households at four children per household. Accordingly, young females usually work in Phnom Penh, while the predominant male adults work in Thailand. Nevertheless, Huijsmans (2014) and Hak et al. (2011) treated migration for work as more of a static and relatively permanent move, not a circular trip. They found that the mover and stayer become the chosen ones, which mitigates their role in migration. Therefore, it is suggested that the role of the mover and stayer is flexible and dynamic, as the mover and stayer may change positions after a few years.

Research by Nurick and Hak (2019) on Cambodian workers in Thailand, conducted one year after the mass expulsion of Cambodian workers following the military coup in 2014, suggested that the historical factors of internal displacement and genocide under the rule of the Khmer Rouge, together with the recent land grabbing and dispossession, contributed to the large-scale undocumented circular migration of Cambodians into Thailand. Interestingly, circularity continued even after their forced return to Cambodia as those undocumented migrants returned to Thailand through legal and illegal channels (Nurick & Hak, 2019). This realization explains why after such a profound exodus, many Cambodians soon returned to work in Thailand. Even though the 2014 expulsion shocked the migrant workers and forced them to return home involuntarily, labor shortage and wage disparity were still enough to draw workers back to work in Thailand.

Existing research distinguishes types of migration but, to a lesser extent, addresses the circular type. Following the above discussion about mobility turns in migration studies, it is worth investigating the causes and patterns of circular migration. Douglas (2007, 2014) mentioned that the householding strategy of collective decision-making within a rural household, and the division of labor between migrating and staying, was enlightening. Although the findings of Hak et al. (2011), Huijsmans (2014), and Nurick and Hak (2019) investigated householding and the determinant of who migrates, they did not connect to the discourse of circular migration. As such, this research attempts to build a typology of labor migration with a focus on the circular type and likewise ventures to explore the factors and patterns of moves, including householding and landownership, in connection with the typology of circularity.

Migrant worker policies in Thailand

Thailand is both a migrant worker sending and receiving country. Before the COVID-19 outbreak in early 2020, four to five million migrant workers were employed in Thailand. At that time, the Thai government employed “flexible policies” toward importing workers from neighboring states to curb its labor shortage as well as raising the wages for local laborers.

Based on cabinet resolutions, these ad hoc, passive, unstable, and confused policies and regulations were used for some time to regulate the importation procedures and handle undocumented workers (Chantavanich, 2007).

Currently, unskilled workers from Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos, the three countries sharing common borders with Thailand, are allowed to work in Thailand under a bilateral memorandum of understanding (MoU). The Thai government seemingly tolerates the presence of most undocumented workers by granting those already working in Thailand a work permit with a two-year duration through a national verification procedure (Chantavanich, 1999). Still, with the most recent October 31, 2020, deadline for work permit applications, many migrant workers ignored the chance to apply for a work permit and continued to work illegally in Thailand. This oversight inadvertently provided flexibility during economic cycles, especially during an unprecedented financial crisis (Chantavanich, 1999). However, in answer to the above lapse, the Working of Aliens Act B.E. 2551 (2008) was formalized (Ministry of Labour, 2008). As a result, non-Thai citizen identity cards (i.e., Pink Cards) with a work permit on the back were issued to Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos nationals. As a byproduct, this grey area of legality has created a liminal situation for these undocumented but tolerated migrants (Jirattikorn, 2015; Menjívar, 2006).

Table 1 summarizes different documents needed for being employed in Thailand.

Table 1: Different Categories of Documents for Migrant Workers

Category	MoU (Work Permit)	Special MoU (Pink Card)	Border Employment	Ethnic Minorities
Right to residence	Visa 2 + 2 years, but after 4 years must return home for 30 days	Visa pursuit to the cabinet resolution	Staying up to 1 month each time	Staying indefinitely unless there is a policy change
Duration of work permitted	2 years at a time with a maximum of two renewals	Based on the conditions set by cabinet resolutions, but no more than 2 years	Up to 90 days	Up to 5 years each time
Required documents	Passport, visa, plus E-work permit	Certificate of identity or passport plus the Pink Card or work permit	Yearly border pass plus work permit	ID card for ethnic minorities or undocumented persons plus a work permit
Permissible jobs	Menial work and domestic work, except prohibited jobs	Menial work, domestic work, fishing boat mechanic, or language tutor	Menial work or domestic work	Any job under an employer (pending Ministerial Regulation)

Note: Summarized from Migrant Working Group (2020)

Nationals of these three neighboring states, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos, and their dependents are allowed to live and work in Thailand. They are the work permit holders following the MoU-designated procedure. After the migrant workers have completed four years of employment, they can leave and return to Thailand if their employers agree to continue employing them. Even those laid off or unable to legally change employers (find a new employer within 30 days) are still allowed to remain. Finally, some migrant workers may not hold work permits but undergo the nationality verification procedure. This group of

workers representing most of the unskilled migrant workers in Thailand is, therefore, between legal and illegal, documented and undocumented status. Regardless of tolerance and ways of obtaining valid documents to work in Thailand, involuntary return or expulsion incidents happen annually. However, the situation worsened following the 2014 military coup. The junta's actions triggered a mass exodus of 170,000 Cambodian migrant workers in 2014 (Keck, 2014), followed by a less severe expulsion of about 90,000 migrant workers being deported or fleeing from Thailand in 2017 (Sen, 2017).

Methodology

Qualitative methods consisting of group and individual interviews were employed in this exploratory study of the circular migration of Cambodian workers to Thailand. The term circular migration in this paper refers to the Cambodian migrant workers moving back and forth between their homes and workplaces in Thailand. The regular and annual sojourners are distinguished from long-term, quasi-permanent types of labor migrants in the conceptual model developed later in this paper.

Considering the limitations of the qualitative method, the authors acknowledge that the data collected is not generalizable. However, they still provide valuable insights when framed in specific contexts. Key informants were initially approached; four NGO leaders and activists concerning laborers and migrants, two in Cambodia and two in Thailand, were interviewed. The authors also consulted with NGO leaders and activists about their opinions on selecting cities and recruiting migrant workers and returnees for additional interviews.

The fieldwork was conducted in the cities of Kampong Cham in Cambodia and Rayong in Thailand. Kampong Cham, a migrant-sending province of Cambodia, consists of ethnic Khmer and Muslim Cham. On the receiving end, many industrial zones and fishing ports in Rayong province of Thailand constitute a pull factor for foreign labor. Moreover, Rayong's proximity to the Thailand-Cambodia border makes it a popular destination for Cambodian workers.

Interviews in two countries were necessary as this research concerned the circular movement between these two countries. Twenty Cambodian migrant workers and returnees, ten from Thailand and ten from Cambodia, were interviewed. The criteria for selecting Cambodian migrant workers were migrants currently working in Thailand. Similarly, the returnees must have been temporarily or permanently back in Cambodia. Most Cambodian migrant workers were in their 20s (10 persons) and 30s (9 persons); only one participant was over 40. An equal number of male and female participants were recruited. The interviews took place in the offices of two NGOs, one in Kampong Cham and one in Rayong.

Focus group interviews were held first. The focus group interviews were ice-breaking sessions for the participants to understand the purpose of the research, share their working experiences abroad, and casually express their viewpoints. The researchers also took this chance to modify the list of questions for the semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interviews formed the predominant part of this research. All participants in the focus group discussions were additionally individually interviewed. This session was based on an open-ended question list. The questions covered details of their family backgrounds in Cambodia, working experience in Thailand, their social networks, and their circulation patterns. The

interviews were conducted in Khmer and Thai with the help of Thai and Cambodian NGO workers who translated the questions from English during the interview.

The participants' privacy was safeguarded, as some were undocumented workers who did not want to be identified. Pseudonyms are used in this paper to further protect the identity of the participants. According to the conditions required by the ethics review board, the interview script and audio recordings were deleted after the completion of the data analysis. Thematic analysis was employed in this research to analyze the themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The two NGOs initially recruited the participants, and then snowball sampling was implemented to recruit more participants for this study. There are, of course, limitations. Although snowball sampling is convenient, the authors concede that this procedure may lead to biased responses from participants who use the services of NGOs or have contact with their workers. Finally, the small sample size may not reflect the diversity of Cambodian returnees and migrant workers in Thailand.

Ethics approval

This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Singapore University of Social Science (SUSS-IRB) (Reference code: CPE/UEN: 200504979Z).

Findings

Thematic analysis was used for this research. During the selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) process, the authors mapped circular migration patterns with other factors, like our participants' backgrounds, social networks, and migration experiences. The findings are as follows:

Expulsions are compensated by circulations

The expulsions of undocumented migrant workers did not necessarily reduce the number of Cambodian workers in Thailand; on the contrary, the market-driven post-exodus return increased the number. In June 2014, due to rumors of a crackdown on undocumented workers, some 170,000 Cambodians fled the country, with a similar exodus taking place in 2017. Both incidents had a temporary impact, given that, in 2018, 408,658 Cambodians registered to work in Thailand (International Labour Organization, 2019). This number included returning migrant workers and those new to working in Thailand. The increase in Cambodian migrant workers may be due to Thai bosses urging their Cambodian workers to bring back more workers from their villages to ease the labor shortage in Thailand, seeing as the post-exodus led to an unskilled labor shortage which harmed Thailand's economy. The forced exit and market-driven return demonstrated an irregular type of circular migration, justifying Nurick and Hak's findings (2019). This mass return led to the Thai government softening its stand against undocumented workers and introducing a one-stop service at the borders to facilitate the return of Cambodian workers.

Those who held a work permit or a pink card were not affected by the expulsion; as one participant said, "We have a pink card. The expulsion only targets undocumented workers" (RY4, 36-year-old male, 10 years in Thailand). Others were requested to stay with their employers even if they did not hold valid documents. Peer group influence or support might work; as RY3 stated, "I called my friends. They didn't go back home, so I decided to stay too." Some just ignored the exodus. These migrant workers returned to Cambodia but sojourned to Thailand in the same year.

> *"I am a gardener[…] my former Thai employer called me to go back to work[…] no one took up my work [after Cambodians were expelled]."*
>
> (RY3, 35-year-old male, 6 years in Thailand)

A participant in Rayong possessed a work permit for employment on a fishing boat, but they had changed jobs to work on land repairing fishing nets, which did not match her documents. The correct document is a Pink Card for those working on the land. They earned a monthly wage of 9,000 Thai baht (US$249) and returned to work after they fled to Cambodia for two months during the expulsion in 2014.

> *"I went back home because I feared that I would be caught. Then I contacted one friend who remained working in Thailand. He told me everything was alright, so I went back to work [in Thailand]."*
>
> (RY5, 33-year-old female, 5 years in Thailand)

Householding as a collective decision

The common practice of householding is that older parents stay home to care for the farm. Younger family members find wage jobs in Thailand and occasionally return home. Many migrant workers have family farms, but the sizes of the farms vary. For example, an extended family in this study had only four family members (no children) but owned a large rice field (KC2) which was the largest among all participants. In contrast, a seven-member extended family had a small parcel of only two hectares (KC6).

The social differentiation of farming work conforms to the principle of comparative advantage. As with RY1, a 30-year-old male, who was in Thailand for three years, said,

> *My parents farm the land […] if I do not come back, they will hire a laborer to harvest the rice […] the wage is about 400,000 riel per hectare (US$98) […] much cheaper than my wage earned in Thailand […] which is 370–400 [Thai] baht a day (US$10–11).*

Some families may send their older children to work in Thailand, but it may not be the only pattern. Several Cambodian migrant workers were interviewed for this study, where the couples were the migrants, and the children were the stayers, even though some children were adults.

Most are long-term and quasi-permanent labor migrants

If possible, most low-income, unskilled migrant workers stay in the receiving country to maximize their earnings and reduce transportation costs. These migrant workers may return

home due to special occasions or unforeseen events, such as getting married, learning about serious health issues of family members, or funerals of close relatives. In this study, these migrant workers are referred to as long-term and quasi-permanent labor migrants. Otherwise, the ones who only return home at the end of migration are referred to as permanent returnees.

One participant (RY3) was a factory worker in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, for eight years before they migrated to work in Thailand. They stayed in Thailand for six years. Their family did not have a farm.

> *I work here in a factory [in Rayong, Thailand] every day, no day off, no holiday, more chance to work overtime than factories in Phnom Penh[…] My wage now is 300 [Thai] baht daily (US$9)[…] I never went back home. I work hard and earn more here. My friends [Cambodian co-workers in the factory] also don't go back home, so I decide to stay too.*
>
> (RY3, 31-year-old female, 6 years in Thailand)

Without personal networks in the receiving country or money for an agent, landless laborers are less likely to work in Thailand, such as the case of KC6, who joined their husband to work in Thailand. They were landless laborers who worked for other farms. They earned 9,000 Thai baht per month (US$269) as cleaners in a shopping mall in Thailand, compared with 5,000 riels per day (US$4) as irregular wage laborers (not working every day, even during farming seasons). Other landless laborers like KC6 were asked if they wanted to work in Thailand.

> *They wish to go and work in Thailand, but they do not have money to process legal documents […] I paid 20,000 [Thai] baht (US$598) to a broker for documentation, applying for a pink card, and allocation of a job in Thailand.*
>
> (KC6, 47-year-old female, 1.5 years in Thailand)

Circularity of migrant workers from farm-owning families

The proximity of Cambodia to Thailand enables Cambodian migrants to easily travel from border provinces in Cambodia, like Koh Kong and Banteay Meanchey, to Thailand. Even for provinces in the middle region of Cambodia, such as Phnom Penh, Kampong Cham, and Svay Rieng, the journey to Thailand only takes about 15 hours over land, which is easy to access because of many affordable means of transportation.

A group of migrant workers who return to Cambodia during the harvest season, but not necessarily annually, was identified. Seasonal circulation is an inadequate description of the circularity of farm-owning families. None of the participants returned to Cambodia yearly though all said they helped their family to harvest if they were there. One participant (KC4) in Kampong Cham said they returned home every two years, just staying for a month. If they were there during the harvest, they would help; otherwise, their parents would hire several laborers. Due to wage parity, some leftover family members could employ a local laborer for assistance. Also, seasonal return is unnecessary because hiring a laborer locally to help the harvest is relatively cheap. Another participant reported the details:

> *My family [here in Kampong Cham, Cambodia] consists of six members[…] My family owns three hectares of rice field[…] I come back to assist my family with the rice harvest and plan to stay for around 2–3*

> *months. This is my first time to come back [during my 3-year stay in Thailand][…] If I do not come back, my parents will hire workers to harvest the rice. It is about 300,000 to 400,000 riel (US$73–98) to hire a worker to harvest rice per hectare, which is much cheaper than my wage earned in Thailand.*
>
> (KC1, 30-year-old male, met in Kampong Cham for the interview, working on construction sites in Thailand for 3 years)

Circular migrants lack local cohesion

Cambodian migrants are separated from their Thai counterparts when working in Thailand. The authors argue that this disparity is a fundamental cause of their circularity in migration. More specifically, for such migrants, the lack of local networks and frequent circulation is mutually reinforcing. Most participants reported that they speak and understand Thai but cannot read and write the language. They all learn Thai on the job, by themselves, and with their co-ethnic or Thai co-workers. One participant, RY1, a 21-year-old female staying 2 years in Thailand, described their hesitation to speak Thai:

> *I speak a little bit of the Thai language, but I am too shy to speak because sometimes the audience misunderstands me. I do not read and write Thai characters […] There are Thai co-workers in my workplace, and my boss is a Thai. I seldom talk to them.*

The social networks of Cambodian migrant workers tend to be predominantly co-ethnic. One participant, RY4, a 36-year-old male, who has been staying for 10 years in Thailand, said:

> *I work on a large fishing boat weighing 80,000 kg which carries up to 40 seamen. […] I know many seamen on board, Thais, Burmese, and Cambodians, but they are not close friends; they are my co-workers. […] I know 50 persons in this neighborhood [where I stay] in Rayong, including 10 Thais; they are primarily grocers and vendors.*

Cambodian migrant workers maintain transnational connections back home with their families, relatives, and friends in their hometown. With the enhancement of the internet and mobile phones, as well as the free social networking apps, many spend more time virtually with their co-ethnic relationships rather than building friendships with local Thais. Take, for instance, RY7, a 34-year-old female staying two years in Thailand, who said:

> *I have no close friends here and rarely join in social activities with others in Thailand. My friends around 20 to 30 persons remain in Cambodia, including several close friends. […] I chat with my friends in Cambodia over the internet, using the Line app. But for my parents, they are too old to use Line. I still rely on phone calls to talk with them.*

The mutual reinforcement of irregularity and circularity

The Thai government and Thai employers benefit from the irregularity of a certain number of migrant workers. The advantage of flexibility enjoyed by the government has been thoroughly

discussed. For employers, it is a way to exploit the wages of undocumented workers by making them part-time and temporary employees. Workers employed on construction sites tend to work for a particular building company because of the sub-contractor system. A subcontracted building company is responsible for part of the construction work, for example, welding. Once the job is completed, the subcontractors pay the workers and move on to another job site. Sometimes, there is a gap between two contracts, which can be weeks to months. The workers do not earn any wage during this period. In the worst-case scenario, some subcontractors do not pay the migrant workers upon completion of the job, thereby taking advantage of their irregularity.

> *I worked in an iron factory and earned 320 baht per day (US$9.60). My wage is calculated based on my working days […] I do not have a job for around 2 to 3 months/year.*
>
> (KC2, who had worked in Thailand for 2 years, was interviewed in Kampong Cham. They returned home when their wife was about to give birth and stayed to help harvest their family's rice fields)

Undocumented status, or the shifting between the two positions, creates uncertainty for these migrant workers, often posing the dilemma of staying and working in Thailand or returning home. The lack of a concrete plan loosens the local and job attachment of these Cambodians. Some may move back and forth between Cambodia and Thailand to explore the opportunities on each side. In contrast, others make circular movements within a period, utilizing the flexibility of unclear rules to facilitate their irregular migration.

Some returned permanently after a long period of working

Few returnees decide not to return to Thailand. Still, those returnees who stay in Cambodia start businesses and take care of their family by using the skills and experiences they learned in Thailand to explore chances in Cambodia. Furthermore, their savings from income earned in Thailand may be enough to start businesses.

Thai employers exploited some of the participants. For example, one returnee told the author they initially did not intend to return to Cambodia (KC5). They worked in a resort in Trat province, Thailand, and earned a low salary of 4,500 Thai baht per month (US$135). Although accommodation and food were included, the participant felt underpaid and complained about the food quality and unequal treatment between Thai and Cambodian employees. They earned as much as a metalworker, who was 400,000 riels per month (US$98) before leaving Cambodia. Even though they had been allowed to stay in the resort by their former Thai boss and not forced to return during the expulsion in 2014, they intended not to return to work in Thailand any longer after this return.

A female participant in Rayong, working in a cotton factory, said they were planning to return to Cambodia next year. Their wage was 180 Thai baht daily (US$5) more than six years ago. It later rose to 200 Thai baht (US$6) and subsequently reached 300 Thai baht (US$9) at the time of the interview. Regardless of these wage increases, their overall earnings were still limited.

> *I didn't get overtime work there [in Thailand]. I want to work there if overtime work is available. But there are usually not enough working hours in the factory for earning more wages [by working overtime]. At the*

> *beginning, when I first came to work in Thailand, the factories offered many jobs, and working overtime was common, but recently there are fewer jobs now and less overtime work.*
>
> (RY3, 31-year-old female, 6 years in Thailand)

Discussion

The proximity and common border between Cambodia and Thailand enable Cambodian migrant workers to move back and forth between Cambodia and Thailand. Even though the exoduses in 2014 and 2017 were incidents of mass repatriation of undocumented Cambodian workers, the term repatriation is misleading in these cases as it does not include the reality of circularity in the nature of the movement. Similar circular movements happened during the financial crises in 1997 and 2008 and the prolonged coronavirus pandemic in 2020–2021. The sudden expulsion of Cambodian migrant workers in 2014 was a shock, and the exodus in 2017 also caused worry. Nevertheless, undocumented work in some form or other is the norm for most Cambodian migrants working in Thailand. Many migrant workers regularly switch between documented and undocumented, legal and illegal status, sporadically comply with national verification, do not renew the pink card upon expiration, or change jobs without following proper procedures.

More Cambodian workers return to work in Thailand as a response to the market mechanism. After the exodus in 2014, one-stop service centers for visa and work permits were introduced at the main immigration checkpoints of the Thailand-Cambodia border. The one-stop service is a fast-track registration service for pink card holders. The one-stop service centers facilitate the documentation and procedure for prospective migrant workers. This measure helps to shift more undocumented workers towards a temporary document (pink card) and, subsequently, a work permit. Therefore, the one-stop service centers are vital to rebuilding the confidence of the migrant workers and drawing them back to work in Thailand.

Another aspect of irregularity that facilitates circularity is the informal and precarious employment of these undocumented workers. They are neither employed under a contract nor work continuously, and some of their wages are calculated at job completion (like construction workers). When they do not have jobs, and if their accommodation and food are not included in their employment term, they may temporarily return home instead of waiting in Thailand. Likewise, the workers will leave Thailand if Thai employers fail to pay them upon finishing their agreed work. Even though the one-stop service centers help reduce the number of entirely undocumented workers, the documented and undocumented descriptions are temporary labels. The fact is that a pink card is only a temporary document, and the Thai government's tolerant attitude persists. Many migrant workers may continue their undocumented way of working in Thailand, while others discontinue their pink cards upon expiry or change jobs. In effect, the liminal status of these migrant workers remains largely unchanged

Relatively weak integration into broader Thai culture and society at their workplace contributes to fewer inter-ethnic ties and little cohesion in the local community. Language is undoubtedly a barrier, especially when there is a lack of formal Thai language training, so many only learn the local language on the job. The Cambodian migrant workers generally do not have many local social activities to join, so those who can afford travel opt for a trip home to Cambodia. Following Berry's (1997) acculturation model, it is suggested that Cambodian

migrant workers maintain a separate way of acculturation with the Thai host society. Easy access to the internet and affordable mobile phones helps to build transnational space between these migrant workers and their relatives and friends back home. Therefore, the two scenarios of its effect on circularity can be predicted, but they are contradictory.

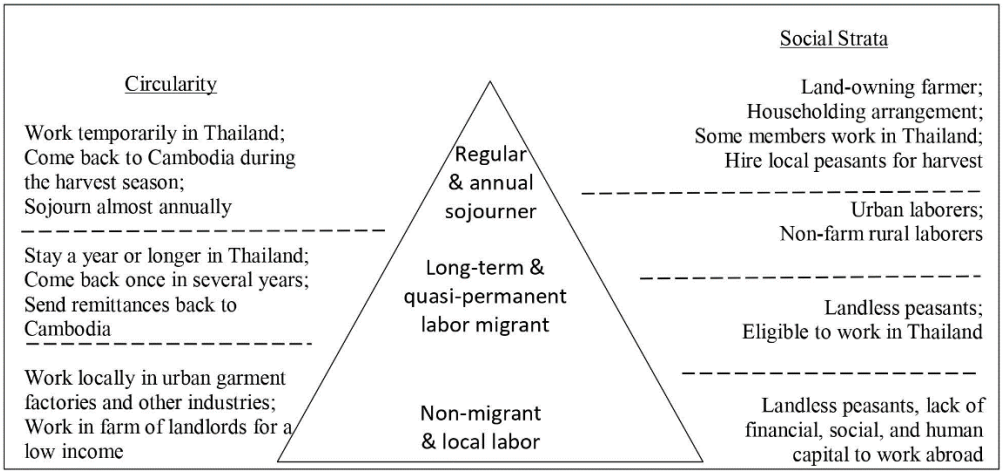
On the one hand, migrant workers can easily see their family members virtually over the internet, as if they were sojourning back to Cambodia at any time; hence they are less homesick and have less motivation to spend money on the journey back home. On the other hand, migrants invest time and resources in the transnational social space and connect with their friends via SMS and communication apps, leaving them less incentive to develop local friendship networks. If the migrants are satisfied with the Khmer speaking comfort zone in the virtual space, they will not want more challenges and be less keen on making friends with local Thais. This study, however, refrains from concluding this aspect as the sample size in this study was too small. Further corresponding research may reveal more compelling and interesting insights.

Depending on each family, householding may be one of the reasons for migration for those who own a big farm. Not all Cambodian families send their oldest children to work abroad. Sometimes both the husband and wife migrate, while their children, including adult sons, remain behind. This study argues that this is a rational calculation based on comparative advantage. Experienced parents may earn more working abroad than youths. Also, the circularity depends on the workforce of the family. Some migrants do not need to return annually to help with harvesting because it is cheaper to hire laborers locally or ask relatives to help on each other's farms. The migrants' wages in Thailand are usually higher than employing one or more laborers in Cambodia. If the migrants are changing jobs, or in the case of a life event such as a wife giving birth, they are usually happy to return home during the harvest season.

Regarding land-owning farmers and landless laborers, the former follows the householding practice of some family members to migrate, and the rest stay. This study considers that the farm size (per capita) may have a bearing, but the threshold is unidentified due to methodological limitations. Land-owning families sojourn back home to Cambodia practically annually to help with the harvest. Those with relatively small rice fields or landless do not need to care about their farm. Although the frequency and pattern vary, these migrant workers occasionally return to visit their families in Cambodia. If landless laborers have connections or can afford to pay an agent, many migrate for work as they wish. Those who are very poor remain, as they have no choice but to work by seeking waged employment in a Cambodia-based factory.

Figure 1 displays the stratification, householding and circular migration of Cambodians working in Thailand. This typology is a summary based on the findings of this study; it is not a generalized pattern of Cambodian migrants going back and forth between Cambodia and Thailand.

Figure 1: Typology of Circular Labor Migration



Note: Developed by the authors

This typology (Figure 1) visually represents Cambodian workers' circular migration between Cambodia and Thailand. It suggests that they are not persons who sojourn daily for only brief periods between two countries. At the same time, they are more than just ordinary or seasonal migrant workers. The typology takes into account the different categories of sojourners and their respective socioeconomic backgrounds in relation to the nature of their migration circularity. Furthermore, it is proposed that farmland ownership is an important factor in determining the nature of their circularity. Although Douglas (2007, 2014) found that householding and collective decisions of a family were affirmed as the key to triggering decisions to move, this study provides further details on land ownership and its links to circularity. It also suggests potential explanations as to why some do not decide to move, as many may be too poor to afford an agency's fees and not have the connections to work abroad.

Concluding remarks

The results of this study affirm existing findings on the householding practices of some family members migrating and staying. They fill a knowledge gap in circular migration and householding. Concurrently, the results carry public policy implications for NGO services, as flexible circular and temporary labor migration (CTLM) programs are yet to be widely adopted in many developed countries' labor programs, especially in Asia. More restrictive temporary labor migration (TLM) programs are still in use, imposing a fixed term of stay and avoiding the possibility of permanent residence for the migrant worker.

Finally, it is hoped that this exploratory study can contribute to a deeper understanding of the types of circular migration that are less addressed, especially those involving householding. Perhaps, IGOs and NGOs may reconsider adjusting their programs to be more circularity friendly to achieve a triple-win (Wickramasekara, 2011). At the same time, the authors acknowledge that the findings and proposed typology can be further validated by follow-up research employing a larger sample and more comprehensive data collection methods. Subsequent research should focus on longitudinal fieldwork among the origin and destination countries of circular migration flows to complement the findings of this study.

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